

Cultivating organisational compassion in universities: a new approach for the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers and supervisors

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Overview of Presentation

- Both staff and students need to engage in mutual co-creation of environments that contribute to both parties flourishing.
- Cultivating workplace compassion in higher education could be used to address many of the problems that are endemic.
- We are covering:
 - The wider context of UK higher education and unintended but avoidable stress
 - The role that compassionate leadership can play in creating more positive working environments
 - The implications of a compassionate approach for the PGR student – supervisor relationship

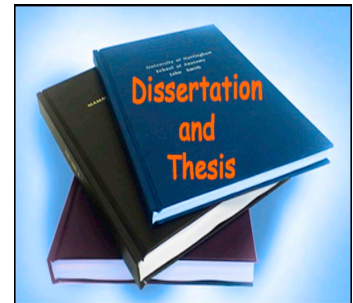
The wider context of higher education and stress

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- Enormous changes to the UK higher education sector since 1997
- Continual process of shifting from a traditional, collegiate model to one of mass participation and marketisation, in environment of wider neoliberalism in public sector
- Increasing market competition between universities
- Growing managerialism
- Frequent performance measurement and continuous and increasing workload pressure
- Evidence of endemic bullying, harassment and 'exclusive' practices
- Poor university leadership
- Frighteningly high levels of hopelessness and dissatisfaction amongst academic staff
- Resulting in an increase in the risk of mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and burnout amongst faculty

Relevance to PGR Students

- PGR students depend on an effective relationship with their supervisors – key factor in successful and timely completion
- PGR students experience:
 - Huge pressure to succeed
 - Disposition towards improbably high standards – perfectionism
 - It's personal – it's “my” project...and isolation – “No-one else understands...”
 - Wooliness of the standards being required: *The wooliness is what I cannot bear. Everyone's opinions differ on the quality and substance of the work*
 - It's a LONG journey...*I feel depressed and angry and am impatient for this unbearably long process to be over.*
 - Poor supervision / supervisory relationship
 - Poor work/life balance
 - Lifecycle transitions, finances, insecure housing



- Doctoral supervision is often the "teaching" activity that academics look forward to the most
- Pressures to take more and more students
- Less and less time available for supervision due to other priorities
- So there is a 'perfect storm' of avoidable suffering



A word about ‘suffering’

- Suffering is a “pervasive” reality of organisational life (Kanov 2021)
- We don’t pay enough attention to it as organisational scholars – and workers
- The Oxford English Dictionary defines suffering as “the state of undergoing pain, distress, or hardship”
- There are two types that are relevant to organisations:
 - Inevitable – usually life events such as bereavement which impact on work in various ways
 - Preventable – that which is caused by people, systems, processes within our organisations
- Compassion is a powerful antidote to suffering at work – we need to put this at the top of the agenda in our universities

Compassion and Compassionate Leadership

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Compassion

- Compassion is one of the universal human values (West 2021).
- Compassion is a vital concept that could be integrated into all aspects of university life at all levels.
- Compassion addresses suffering directly.
- Compassion could relieve the current state of suffering in universities.
- Compassion is more than merely a feeling, emotion, or empathy.



What is compassion?

Table 1	Definitions of Compassion	Field of Studies
A dynamic, iterative process with four components	1) An awareness and openness to other people's suffering; 2) an empathic, imaginative concern that allows one to understand another person's suffering, e.g., by putting oneself in their shoes; 3) a deep desire to alleviate the suffering in a thoughtful and proper manner leading to 4) compassionate action (Zulueta, 2021).	Health care
A complex construct with five elements	1) Perceptiveness to suffering; 2) understanding of its universality; 3) acceptance, nonjudgment; 4) distress tolerance; 5) intentions to act in a helpful way (Strauss et al., 2016)	Health care Psychological Studies
A distinct appraisal process	To have distinct display behaviors, distinct experiences, and physiological responses (de Zulueta, 2016; Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas, 2010).	Psychological Studies
A cognitive process	To identify a problematic issue, to create a plan to address the issue kindly and proactively (Gilbert, 2016)	Higher Education
An evolved motivational system	"A sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it" (Gilbert, 2019a, p.109) ;(Gilbert, 2020b, pp.4-94); (Anstiss, Passmore and Gilbert, 2020, p.40); (Denney, 2021, p.40); (Mongrain, Keltner and Kirby, 2021, p.5).	Psychological Studies
A rational process that emerged from the interaction of somatic, affective, cognitive, attentional, and embodied processes	A sensitivity shown to appreciate another person's pain, along with a willingness to assist and to promote the well-being of that person, to find a solution to their circumstance (Perez-Bret, Altisent and Rocafort, 2016)	Health care
A dynamic interpersonal Process	Noticing the presence of suffering within an organization, feeling, sensemaking, taking action to alleviate suffering (Dutton, Workman and Hardin, 2014, p.277-278; M. Worline and Dutton, 2017, p.1)	Organizational Studies
A dynamic interpersonal subprocess	Noticing , Empathizing, Assessing, Responding with action to alleviate suffering (Simpson and Farr-Wharton, 2017; Simpson, Farr-Wharton and Reddy, 2020)	Organizational Studies

Compassionate Leadership

- Facilitating the cultivation of compassion relations in an organization as a whole through their leadership.
- By role modelling compassion through their presence to take care of academic suffering.
- Complex and dynamic phenomenon.
- Involves planning, coordinating, supporting, and inspiring others to achieve organizational goals.
- Vital for leading and replenishing resources to alleviate avoidable types of suffering.



NEAR Model of Compassion

- (1) Noticing of a colleague's suffering
- (2) Empathising with the colleague's distress
- (3) Assessing to understand the context and the causes of the colleague's suffering
- (4) Responding with actions that are aimed at alleviating the colleague's suffering



(Dutton et al., 2014; Simpson & Farr-Wharton, 2017)

Leadership for Avoiding Suffering

- Review systems and processes
- Design out excess bureaucracy – consider impact on staff time and workload
- A default position of trust
- Manage poor-performance quickly
- First find out if there are underlying reasons for poor performance
- Staff wellbeing is NOT an individual's own responsibility
- Student welfare depends on staff wellbeing – think oxygen masks!
- Who's doing it well? How can we learn from them?



Practical Implications for PGR Students and Supervisors

Fiona and Haleh



Compassion in Supervision


- Time
- Safe space
- Respect
- Observation (Noticing) – what's going on?
- Active listening (empathising) – tell me how you feel
- Assessing the situation and context
- Awareness of and signposting to appropriate additional support
- Responding - what can I do to help?
- Stepping OUT of being the expert!



Compassion in Doctoral Supervision

- Build positive and compassionate relationships with your supervisors.
- Respect and trust.
- Put yourself in your supervisor's shoes.
- Create a felt presence and space for the expression of suffering.
- Seeing (Noticing) – Are you all right?
- Connecting to your supervisors (Empathising).
- Understanding through a listening dialogue and evaluating the cause (Assessing).
- Taking wise and thoughtful action to help (Responding).
- Avoid unrealistic expectations from your supervisors.
- Express gratitude to your supervisors.
- Do not forget your supervisors are human beings too!





**Compassion is having
the courage to change
the world.**

Anon

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